

Progressive Contextualization: Thinking about Extreme Events

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Abstract:

This essay reviews the following works:

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Toxic Injustice: A Transnational History of Exposure and Struggle. By Susanna Rankin Bohme. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 343. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780520278998.

Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction. By Gastón R. Gordillo. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Pp. xi + 315. \$26.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822356196.

Unearthing Conflict: Corporate Mining, Activism, and Expertise in Peru. By Fabiana Li. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 265. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822358312.

Engineering Mountain Landscapes: An Anthropology of Social Investment. Edited by Laura L. Scheiber and María Nieves Zedeño. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 201. \$45.00 paper. ISBN: 9781607814337.

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***Note: Full text of article below

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Progressive Contextualization: Thinking about Extreme Events

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In 1983 Andrew Vayda proposed “progressive contextualization” as a research method for human ecology.¹ By focusing on a specific activity by a specific people in a specific place—in his case timber cutting and fires in Malaysia and Indonesia—he argued it was possible to avoid a priori boundaries and to allow the researcher, in the best Braudelian tradition, to follow causes and effects wherever they lead.² Further, the method allows the investigator to resolve the question of what the unit of analysis is, because there is no assumption of stability of the system under study or its units. The researcher begins with a single event and sees where it leads her or him in understanding humans in their relationships to each other, the environment, and the political economy in which they are situated.

In a similar manner, over the past half century social scientists have used “disasters” or other forms of unique events to focus their attention on the impact of capitalist expansion and colonialism. To paraphrase Steve Kroll-Smith and Valerie Gunter, disasters (unique events) are good to think.³ They focus our attention on aspects of culture and society we might not have paid attention to in the past by laying bare contradictions hidden by established political and economic structures. Anthony Oliver-Smith notes that such events are also “difficult to think” because of their all-encompassing nature.⁴ They sweep across a community, nation, or culture, often bringing into question established political, social, economic, and cultural structures, and in some cases forcing communities to adapt to new and unexpected social and “natural” environments.

¹ Andrew P. Vayda, “Progressive Contextualization: Methods for Research in Human Ecology,” *Human Ecology* 11 (1983): 265–281.

² Andrew P. Vayda, “Causal Explanation of Indonesian Forest Fires: Concepts, Applications, and Research Priorities,” *Human Ecology* 34 (2006): 615–635.

³ Steve Kroll-Smith and Valerie Gunter, “Legislators, Interpreters, and Disasters: The Importance of How as Well as What Is Disaster?,” in *What Is a Disaster? Perspectives on the Question*, ed. E. L. Quarantelli (New York: Routledge, 1998), 152–176.

⁴ Anthony Oliver-Smith, “Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power and Culture,” in *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*, ed. Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 2002), 23.

Adaptation, however, should not be seen as acceptance. In many cases it takes the form of resistance as indigenous peoples, peasants, industrial workers, and bureaucrats struggle to hold back the effects of the changes that are often forced on them by the new context.⁵

Oliver-Smith, in his 1994 paper analyzing the 1970 earthquake in Yunguy, Peru, demonstrated that events which impact a population are never “one-off” and never simply the result of a mine, dam, hurricane, tornado, earthquake, invasion, or political negotiation, but are the culmination of a long history leading to the particular situation under study.⁶ Virginia García-Acosta reminds us that what we often view as one-off events are, in fact, the convergence of two phenomena.⁷ First is the vulnerability of the affected population—that is to say, the social, political, and economic conditions, dare we say “political economy,” of the system that make one population appreciably more susceptible to the worst effects of a hazard than others. And only a distant second is the natural or human-caused proximal event resulting in their destruction.

In its own fashion, each book reviewed in this essay illustrates how what at first glance appears to be a singular event is always embedded in broader social, historic, and cultural contexts that both help explain its origin and the varied human responses to it. In each case, these books address not an act of god⁸ but an event or condition resulting from human activity, specifically capitalist expansion.

In *Unearthing Conflict*, Fabiana Li demonstrates how perceptions of water, pollution, and the value of a mountain conflicted in the context of Peru’s continuing push to modernize through the extraction of primary materials. As sacred places where the gods reside, destinations of pilgrimage, or the sources of power, mountains have always held a particular place in the human imagination.⁹ Even in our secular world we continue to be drawn to peaks such as Mount McKinley, Popocatepetl, Mount Fuji, Kilimanjaro, Illimani, Potosí, and Mount Olympus.¹⁰ But mountains, unfortunately, may also be the location of rich mineral resources, ensuring that from the early days of colonialism they would be sites for exploitation and the source of political and social conflict.

Li explores Peru’s protracted struggles over mineral exploitation. The child of Chinese Peruvians, Li returned to Peru for two years of research between January 2005 and December 2006. She interviewed miners, engineers, government officials, and community leaders as well as officials with various NGOs associated with mining enterprises in Peru. She returned to Cajamarca in 2009 and 2012 to add context to her project with an investigation of a developing conflict in another mining project. Her background and clear familiarity with the people and region provide this book with a strong ethnographic foundation.

In her introduction, Li identifies the various actors in the conflict over mining in the region of Cajamarca, including industrial miners, politicians, the US-based Newmont Mining Corporation, and the Peruvian company Buenaventura (which jointly control the mine, with 51 and 44 percent of the shares, respectively). Also in play was the World Bank, as well as local and national politicians and, not surprisingly, the people who live near the mine or along the rivers subject to pollution from its operations. Mining has existed in Peru since before the Spanish conquest. As Li points out, given this long history of mineral extraction, the economic policies of Peru that place an emphasis on mining cannot be laid solely at the feet of the neoliberal shift that took place in Latin America in the late 1990s. In a vein similar to Mark Aspinwall’s book, discussed later in this essay, Li demonstrates how the neoliberal reforms introduced new labor laws that reduced the ability of unions to fight for and protect their members, communities, and resources.

In the course of the book, Li confronts and contests the concept of “equivalence” in the context of environmental and political issues surrounding mineral extraction. Equivalence—how things are made

⁵ See, for example, Gregory V. Button and Mark Schuller, eds., *Contextualizing Disaster* (New York: Berghahn, 2016); Andrew Maskrey, comp., *Los desastres no son naturales* (Bogotá: La Red/CIESAS, Tercer Mundo Editores, 1993); Virginia García Acosta, comp., *Historia y desastres en América Latina*, vol. 1 (Bogotá: La Red/CIESAS, Tercer Mundo Editores, 1996); Virginia García Acosta, comp., *Historia y desastres en América Latina*, vol. 2 (Bogotá: La Red/CIESAS, Tercer Mundo Editores, 1997); Steve Kroll-Smith, Vern Baxter, and Pam Jenkins, *Left to Chance: Hurricane Katrina and the Story of Two New Orleans Neighborhoods* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015); Elizabeth Marino, *Fierce Climate Sacred Round: An Ethnography of Climate Change in Shishmaref, Alaska* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2015).

⁶ Anthony Oliver-Smith, “Peru’s Five-Hundred-Year Earthquake: Vulnerability in Historical Context,” in *Disasters, Development and Environment*, ed. Ann Varley (London: John Wiley and Sons, 1995), 31–48.

⁷ Virginia García-Acosta, “Historical Disaster Research,” in *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*, ed. Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research 2002), 49–66.

⁸ Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁹ Richard W. Stoffle, Richard Arnold, Maurice Frank, Betty Cornelius, Lalovi Miller, Jerry Charles, Gerland Kane, Alex K. Ruuska, and Kathleen Van Vlack, “Ethnology of Volcanoes: Quali-Signs and the Cultural Centrality of Self-Voiced Places,” in *Engineering Mountain Landscapes: An Anthropology of Social Investment*, ed. Laura L. Sheiber and María Nieves Zedeño (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2015), 99–115.

¹⁰ Gary Martin, *Sacred Earth: Places of Peace and Power* (New York: Sterling, 2007).

equivalent so they may be exchanged, for example, two goats for a table—is in many ways central to the capitalist monetized economy. It is a long-standing topic in economic anthropology.¹¹ What if there is no equivalent? (Treated water, even if safe for consumption, is never equivalent to “wild” water. The Black Hills are sacred and no amount of money can create an equivalence.) This conundrum of equivalence, she argues, is at the heart of much of the conflict over extraction in Peru and by extension in other parts of the world. The mine and its engineers say they are returning water of “equivalent” quality back to the canals for irrigation, but the water is not “wild,” and the people remember when they had no fear of swimming in the canals.

The final part of the book focuses both on the role of experts in the conflicts that arise over extractive enterprises and the pollution they cause, and the rhetoric of proponents that modern, environmentally “safe” mining—like “clean coal”—is possible.¹² Li draws particular attention to how the form and process used to produce environmental impact assessments take precedence over their content. The result is a façade of agreement and public input to a set of standards that are well within what the company sees as manageable, but that never resolve the fundamental questions of “equivalence.”

Rubble, by Gastón R. Gordillo, is a result of fourteen months of ethnographic field work over four years, beginning in 2003. In that time, Gordillo systematically explored the “largest and most accelerated human made devastation on record” (1). Here was fast-tracked destruction which evicted thousands of people from their homes, and obliterated millions of trees to create soy fields. As is the case for many who venture into new areas to conduct ethnographic research, the experience dislocated his senses and opened him to new ideas and ways of viewing rubble that “have long remained invisible to urban eyes.”¹³

Gordillo's original goal was to study not the ruins left by this modern tragedy but those resulting from the Spanish conquest of the “Gran Chaco” of northern Argentina. Over four years of field study, however, taught him that it was impossible to “separate older ruins from new ones (1),” forcing him to rethink the relationship between space and place—how places can be destroyed, and the nature of what is created by the destruction. The introduction demonstrates how his theoretical outlook and methods developed and changed in the course of his research. In the Chaco he encountered residents whose view of ruins and what they represented were different from the narrative found in the geographic and anthropological communities, which, along with the state, tend to venerate ruins and turn them into a fetishized representation of some idealized past. Gordillo argues that, for the elite mind, ruins denote a rupture from the past. The state and elites use ruins to mark change. For the subaltern body, they represent a tangible link to the past—a continuum. Ruins become rubble and are not fetishized locations that highlight a break with the past but are a link to what was before. Rubble is part of today that reaches back, linking the past to the present, and it will do so until it is totally absorbed by the earth, but as Gordillo reminds us, citing Lefebvre, “no space vanishes utterly, leaving no trace” (12).¹⁴

In Part 1, Gordillo probes the haunted relationship between criollo (gaucho) culture and the indigenous past. Of particular importance is the Indian past that stalks the Chaco. Haunting, as Gordillo points out, is not memory. The criollo is not a blending of an indigenous past with European culture. Here, “*indio*” means “not like us” (Gordillo, 35). The rubble around them is a haunting reminder of those “others” the ruins were supposed to keep out, making room for “us.”

Gordillo delves into the history of the Chaco, beginning with the early efforts of Spanish explorers drawn, as in other parts of the Americas, by rumors of cities abounding with gold, silver, and other riches. However, just as there was no “Cibola” for Cabeza de Vaca to find in Northern Mexico, the Chaco did not contain a “City of the Césares” abounding with riches. The Chaco, however, like other areas of the New World, contained bodies that could become labor. In 1585, Spanish troops moved into the region and by the end of the sixteenth century had established control over the region. As a result, the Chaco became a profitable producer of cotton and other crops. The exploitation of native groups through slavery and other forms of labor control led to a series of uprisings that by the end of the seventeenth century had reduced the centers of Spanish control to rubble. The void created by the disintegration of state control created the vortex of

¹¹ Extensive discussions of this can be found in the work of Rhoda Halperin, Karl Polanyi, and most recently in David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011).

¹² Safe mining in Peru is the moral equivalent of the tin mining described in James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹³ Jeffrey H. Cohen, *Eating Soup without a Spoon: Anthropological Theory and Method in the Real World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 24.

¹⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 164.

myth and anxiety that Gordillo suggests continues to the present and colors the nature of how states view areal growth to the “edges of imperial expansion.”

In Part 2, Gordillo borrows from Marx and Lefebvre to suggest that the destruction of the Chaco broke the region into new forms that were more malleable and amenable to capitalist exploitation.¹⁵ Here, the book focuses on the city of Esteco and its central role in the ideology of “miracle and curse” in the Chaco. Each year nearly half a million people gather at La Fiesta del Milagro, the largest religious event in northwestern Argentina, a celebration of how, in 1692, the city of Salto was spared along with its patron saints “The Virgin and The Lord of the Miracle” from an earthquake. The same earthquake destroyed Esteco. The destruction of Esteco and salvation of Salta left a profound impact on the collective image of ruin and rubble in the region.

Esteco was destroyed “because of its inhabitant’s extreme wealth, hubris, lack of faith, and their exploitation of indigenous slaves” (86). The curse of Esteco haunts its rubble, making it the most ghostly ruin in the region. In 2005, significant portions of the Esteco ruins were destroyed to make room for soy fields. Officials, elites, and academics (including archaeologists) retain a nostalgia for the overgrown rubble as a symbol and saw this as destruction of national patrimony. The spatial sensibilities of the subalterns were not a nostalgia of Esteco or its rubble, but for the social conditions of an imagined past, when Esteco was the flourishing center of a large section of the Chaco and everyone prospered.

Part 3 explores three specific sets of ruins created across the Chaco by the expansive march of capitalism. The chapter “Ships Stranded in the Forest” covers Gordillo’s search for the remains (rubble) of stranded river steamships. They are the remains of nineteenth-century capitalist enterprises that could not overcome the harshness of the environment. “Bringing a Destroyed Place Back to Life” analyses the processes surrounding El Piquete, once a thriving urban center and the capital of Anta. Today it is in ruins. However, each year a festival brings the rubble back to life for a brief period, linking residents to its riverine past.

“Railroads to Nowhere” covers the IMF-imposed structural adjustments that result in the dismantling of the rail network into the Chaco. As in many parts of the world, railroads provided transportation for goods and people in and out of the Chaco and direct jobs for many. The dismantling of this infrastructure resulted in a significant decline of some local and regional economies in favor of others. Nostalgia for these mechanical symbols of prosperity has made them a potent link to the past. The conquest of the Chaco is not simply a tale of the material debris left by Europeans as they settled and then, in the face of resistance by those already living there or the harshness of the terrain, were forced to retreat. The loss of the railroads shows how often they were also fighting financial and political forces far to the south and east.

Gordillo analyses the rubble left by the violence inflicted over centuries on the people of the region as the state worked to bring the Chaco under its influence. The chapter “Topographies of Oblivion” focuses on the role of the Jesuits in the Spanish expansion into the region and the forts created to pacify, convert, and turn the native populations into labor for enterprises supported by the expanding state. The creations of monuments, Gordillo argues, is a way of forgetting the past and thus rendering into oblivion the failures of the state and the catastrophes it created. The human remains found in and around these piles of rubble are as contested as the locations themselves. The violence perpetrated on Indians is associated with the location and its role in the extraction of wealth. At the same time, criollo residents focus on the place as a node in a wider network of nodes, each of which represents a stage in the state’s expansion. Despite this ambivalence, some criollos pay homage to their indigenous past. They and others are faced by Indians who take part in the annual Carnival parade in a collective representation of the region’s indigenous past.

In his concluding chapter, Gordillo returns to his theme of ruins vs. rubble. He contrasts the state’s use of ruins as “time capsules” providing a fetishized view of a frozen past to that of the subaltern who sees those nodes not as ruins but as rubble, which has a past, present, and future, regardless of whatever disaster or tragedy washes over it—war, commercial capitalism, or industrial agriculture. This wreckage will continue to be part of their quotidian lives.

Susanna Rankin Bohme, in *Toxic Injustice*, begins with the local impact of a disaster, the use of dibromochloropropane (DBCP) on agricultural products, but soon finds herself in a much wider project. Bohme became interested in the topic while working at a litigation consulting firm. Her position in the firm gave her access to a sizable trove of documents filed by litigants in various DBCP cases. As she states in her introduction, “this history is in large part about the legal conflict between workers and corporations, it is also made possible by that conflict” (11). She did not, however, limit herself to court documents, professional papers, hearing records, and government records. Much of the book, in particular the second half, is based

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (1867; New York: Penguin, 1997); Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

on interviews with those involved in the litigation process, including attorneys, workers, activist, scientists, those affected by DBCP, and their families. These interviews were carried out in the United States, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua.

The history of DBCP provides her with a way to tell the story of “lived globalization”—how, in a globalized economy, people placed in harm’s way are often thwarted in their efforts to mitigate a catastrophe or to prevent its reoccurrence. The first three chapters provide a chronological history of the development of DBCP, from its deployment to control the problem of nematodes in the pineapple fields of Hawaii to its use on banana plantations in Central America.

The chemical was first approved in the United States but with strict limitations and safety standards for its use. Even with the restrictions and limitations, approval was not easy. Bohme documents how during the process of obtaining regulatory approval, the developers Dow and Shell tended to obscure or emphasize those aspects of their toxicological findings that would support their case. In the end, even with limitations and restrictions on its use in agricultural products, US farmworkers exposed to DBCP had many fewer protections and access to legal recourse than did industrial workers producing the chemical, a problem exacerbated by the fact that many are Mexican migrants with indeterminate legal status. Even so, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other regulators governing the application of DBCP provided workers with a level of protection their counterparts in Central America did not enjoy, a factor that became important when, in an effort to expand their market, producers sought and received approval for use of DBCP on products grown outside the United States. This meant Central America, where they would not face as strict a health and environmental regulatory regime. The book places the expansion of DBCP use in a transnational and “trans-labor sector” context.

Bohme dissects the sectorial and geographic inequalities around health and regulation as she unpacks the growing evidence for the harm caused by DBCP exposure (including sterility in males). The first alarms were not raised from the fields where ill-equipped workers were applying DBCP but from industrial workers, who although well protected during the manufacturing of the product were still showing high levels of sterility. Even so, DBCP did not come under strict control in the United States until the mid-1980s, when it was demonstrated that water contamination from farm runoff threatened people living far from sites of production and application. Regulations, however, continued to permit the use of DBCP on products grown outside the United States even if they were destined for American markets.

The second half of the book centers on efforts by banana workers in Central America to hold the chemical companies and their governments answerable for the harm done by DBCP. First, Bohme discusses the legal obstacles workers faced when they attempted to bring Dow and Shell to court. The legal doctrine of *forum non conveniens* made it possible for chemical companies, as defendants, to ensure that cases were heard in jurisdictions most convenient to them, and less convenient to the plaintiffs (workers). This meant that many workers had to bear not only the cost of the legal battle but also the costs of transportation from their home countries to and from New York, Miami, Los Angeles, and other distant locations where the cases were being heard. The inability of many plaintiffs to attend proceedings left control of their cases in the hands of attorneys and left many plaintiffs feeling excluded from the process with little say in its ultimate outcome.

The inability of workers to find satisfaction within the legal system led to significant social movements in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Latin America has a long tradition of public protests and movements. In Costa Rica workers formed alliances with public health scientists to win some compensation from the state for harm caused by DBCP. In the end, however, they were not able to convince the state to join in their transnational battle against Dow and Shell.

Nicaraguan workers focused on changing the national legal structure, making it easier for them to go to court against those producing and using DBCP. Their goal was to force litigation into the Nicaraguan courts. They succeeded for a short period of time, but in the end the companies were able to get the process reversed. Despite these setbacks, Bohme suggests workers were able, at least in part, to make the state an important player and locus for the struggle for justice in an increasingly globalized world where the powerful are easily able to choose the field of battle.

Mark Aspinwall’s *Side Effects* is an effort to analyze the impact of one of the most significant multinational agreements in the last half century, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The author focuses on the side agreements governing environmental regulation, and labor laws designed to strengthen Mexico’s “capabilities” in these two areas. These side agreements were in direct response to objections to NAFTA raised by US labor and environmental groups, which argued that weak laws and enforcement would provide US corporations with additional incentives to move to Mexico.

This volume is the result of Aspinwall's interviews with "several dozen" individuals from the government agencies, multinational organizations, NGOs, and private citizens. Much of this work was carried out in the fall of 2008 while he was a visiting scholar at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM). The book first outlines the history of the two side agreements required by the political struggles around ratification of NAFTA, and the reluctance of Mexican authorities who saw them as an infringement on national sovereignty. Aspinwall states that one of his primary goals is to examine the process of "capacity building." Did NAFTA aid or hinder the process of building institutions and structures within Mexico designed to provide environmental and labor regulations more in line with those found in the United States and Canada?

Aspinwall leads the reader through the structural changes that have occurred in Mexico since the 1990s. Central to this process was the creation of the Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT), which consolidated many of the diverse agencies that in the past had control over environmental management and regulation in Mexico. In particular, Aspinwall focuses on the investment made by the Mexican government in developing legislative, policy, and scientific expertise within SEMARNAT. He argues that such investments are critical to developing a bureaucracy capable of providing professional, transparent, and scientifically sound regulation and enforcement.

He is not as optimistic with respect to labor and union politics in the post-NAFTA period. Since the days of Porfirio Díaz, labor politics in Mexico have been tied to the state and corporate interests—a system and orientation which has not changed with NAFTA. The expansion of unions is principally the result of captured unions, whose primary purpose is to control the workforce for the profit of capital and not to support significant social change for workers. The process is abetted by the structures established by the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC), which made it almost impossible for labor organizations to bring complaints before the commission.

Aspinwall concludes that many of Mexico's achievements in environmental regulation and failures in labor regulation have to do with the role of NGOs. The willingness of those in the environmental sector to bring a growing number of Mexican and international NGOs concerned with the environment into the Mexican political process changed the political calculus with respect to environmental issues. This strategy stands in sharp contrast to the labor sector, with its open hostility to outside players. The openness in response to NAFTA with respect to the environment led to greater transparency and success in environmental regulation.¹⁶ An adversarial labor sector has stymied the development of a robust set of laws and regulations protecting human and labor rights.

The subjects of the volume edited by Laura L. Scheiber and María Nieves Zedeño are the people in the high elevations of North America. The book *Engineering Mountain Landscapes: An Archaeology of Social Investment* is the result of a symposium of the same name held at the 2010 annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology. The question they sought to answer at the symposium and to address in this volume is, "Why do humans spend time and effort in the modification of mountain landscapes?" Most of the chapters in this volume present data from societies along the North American Cordillera, from Montana to Southern Mexico (Oaxaca), two additional papers provide examples from the Northern High Plains and southern Appalachia.

Each case is different in its details, but all demonstrate how mountain terrains provided what Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán termed "regions of refuge,"¹⁷ where indigenous and oppressed peoples retreat to escape what Kacy L. Hollenback describes, in her contribution, as convergent catastrophes and ontological insecurity. In every example, people faced a calamity such as conquest, famine, or disease that threatened their way of life. One way to fight and resist is to retreat to mountainous regions where only those with knowledge and skill survive. In the process, people engineer, transform these locations to their use, creating places of refuge that often take on qualities of the sacred.

A second subtext weaves its way through the chapters of this book. Several discussions point or allude to the difficulty of carrying out archaeological research in such inhospitable environments. The very isolation that allowed the Blackfeet (Zedeño, Wendi Field Murray and John R. Murray), Shoshone (Scheiber), Paiute (Alex K. Ruuska), Numic (Richard W. Stoffle, Richard Arnold, Maurice Franck, et al.), Western Apache (Christopher

¹⁶ This optimistic picture is tempered by the reality of continuing environmental degradation in Mexico. See, for example, Secretaría de Gobernación, *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2013–2018* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Gobierno de la República, 2013); Víctor Toledo, *Ecocidio en México: La batalla final es por la vida* (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 2015); and Diana Luque, Angelina Martínez-Yrizar, Alberto Búrquez, Gerardo López Cruz, and Arthur D. Murphy, *Complejos bioculturales de Sonora: Pueblos y territorios indígenas* (Mexico City: CIAD; Red Temática del Conacyt sobre Patrimonio Biocultural de México, 2016).

¹⁷ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Regions of Refuge* (Washington, DC: Society for Applied Anthropology, 1979).

I. Roos), Mixe, Chontal, and Zapotec (Stacie M. King and Danny A. Zborover), Hidatsa (Hollenback), and their ancestors either in southern Appalachia (Shannon D. Koerner and Lynne P. Sullivan) or the mountains of central Nevada (David Hurst Thomas) to find refuge has made it nearly impossible for archaeologists to tell the story.

In its own way, each book discussed in this essay demonstrates how focusing on a single event or process invites us to look at the wider social and historical context in which it occurs, and in doing so reveals the complexities of a political economy in today's global environment.¹⁸ Scheiber and Zedeño demonstrate how engineered mountain landscapes, and by implication many other landscapes, are the result of societies responding to overwhelming pressures from outside forces. In a similar vein, the rubble of the Argentine Chaco (Gordillo) is the result of a two-hundred-year history of destructive events resulting in a rubble-strewn landscape linking the past to the present. Li and Bohme each take a disaster created by modern transnational capital and demonstrate how it resulted in the development of conscious, if not always successful, resistance on the part of subalterns. Aspinwall attempts to show us how multilateral agreements such as NAFTA can provide a platform for structural change. I found his argument to be the least compelling. One could easily argue that SEMARNAT, while it has received increased funding from the state, has had little impact on Mexico's environment. In many ways it provides the government, regardless of party, with cover against a growing middle class which is concerned with life in Mexico City and other urban areas; but it has had little impact on the more remote mining, industrial, and agricultural regions where under-the-table dealings are still prevalent—much like Aspinwall describes for the labor sector.

Author Information

Arthur D. Murphy is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He has carried out research in Mexico, Panama, Ecuador, and Bolivia. He has served on the faculties of the University of Guadalajara and the National University of Mexico (UNAM). Most recently he spent a year in Mexico as a Senior Fulbright Scholar at CIAD-Hermosillo. In addition to a number of professional articles, Dr. Murphy is the coauthor of *Social Inequality in Oaxaca* (1991), *The Mexican Urban Household* (1990), and *Complejos bioculturales de Sonora: Pueblos y territorios indígenas* (2016). In addition, he coedited *Latino Workers in the Contemporary South* (2001) and *The Political Economy of Hazards and Disasters* (2009).

¹⁸ See Eric Wolf, "Distinguished Lecture: Facing Power—Old Insights, New Questions," *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 92, no. 3 (1990): 586–596.

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